

An impossibility is just a possibility you don't understand yet



Nick Dykes
Chief Executive
Belong

| 17 January 2017

At this time of year, we think of new beginnings; taking stock, regrouping, setting new goals. But, there's a tension in the process isn't there? 'Big hairy audacious goals' is what we want but then we have to set 'SMART' objectives which run us up against tight budgets, irritating regulations, our risk-averse colleagues, even our risk-averse selves and we inevitably just end up with a bit of nipping, tucking and compromising. If we had to do it, then we probably would but if it is just that we want to do it, then we probably compromise.

Of course, there is now a consensus that our approach to supporting older people in the social care system needs serious change rather than just a few tweaks. But, are we yet ready to bite the bullet? Have we yet reached the point where we have to 'do it', whatever 'it' is?

In my own organisation we were up against the wall in the new year of 2003 when a growing-concern review revealed that we were close to bankruptcy. Our senior team had moved on to other things and our Board was not sure how we might survive. At the time we operated around fifty 1960s built former local authority care homes that we had spent the previous decade painting and decorating, adding ensuite rooms and conservatories and printing new brochures in the hope of attracting new customers. We had restructured our staff teams and had reduced our costs where we could, but still our operating margin left us precious little to play with and our occupancy and fees were continuing to slip.

As a new Acting Chief Executive and with only one remaining senior colleague with whom to consult, the future looked grim but the challenge was inviting. We set about expanding our team; we brought back a trusted colleague who had left us for another job, we quickly cut away again at costs and reduced the most loss-making services to give us some breathing space whilst we tried to envisage a brighter future.

Our problem, we quickly realised, was that what we provided was outmoded; it belonged to a different era. It was not fit for the new century we were living in. The only people who really wanted our service were those for whom choices were very limited. Those with a choice went elsewhere or just stayed put. And so began the long slow process of making possible something we were only just at the time beginning to understand.

As I prepare now to step away from the sector, I look back on the founding of a new model of service and on five thriving Belong villages with some satisfaction. I look forward to the next two villages, due to open this year, and then the next two opening in around 18 months and realise that our success was that we were brave enough at the time to take a leap of imagination and then articulate enough to persuade others, our staff, our Board, our bank and other partners to take the journey with us. I applaud their faith and their resilience.

The recent sale of the last of our CLS homes marked the end of an era. Over the past decade, we have completely replaced our portfolio of traditional care homes with modern community villages where 24-hour care takes place in small households, where those who can live independently do so and which offer a range of services from outreach into someone's own home in the early stages of dementia to end of life care for those with the highest level of need.

The idea of an impossibility as 'a possibility we don't understand yet' comes from Matt Haig's seasonal classic *A Boy Called Christmas*. It reads as a compelling call to action to even the most cynical of readers and, above all, a challenge to re-imagine what might be possible.

As we embark on 2017 in the 'real' world, we might consider where we draw our own lines when thinking about the possible and the 'impossible'.

For those serious about continuing the process of change, daring to imagine the world of the possible is as good a starting place as any. Happy New Year.

www.nationalcareforum.org.uk

